

SERMON

“He Rose...or We’re Dust!”

Apostles Creed: On the Third Day He Rose from the Dead
Psalm 103:13-17a, 1 Corinthians 15:13-26, 47-49

- Craig Wong, July 23, 2017

So this morning we come to the sixth line of the Apostles Creed which affirms that Jesus rose from the dead. It’s a belief that is unique among the world’s religions, and so central to the Christian faith that the Apostle Paul says that we’re most to be pitied if it isn’t true. Either He rose, or we’re dust, basically.

Most of you are longtime church-goers, but some of you are newer to the faith. There may be a few of you who may be sitting there asking, “You guys really *believe* this stuff?” If so, I want you to know that I really *like* your question, because I think all *Christians*, whether seasoned or not, should occasionally be asking, “Do I really believe this stuff? Do I really believe that Jesus rose from the dead? If so, what does that mean, and does it change the way I live and see the world?”

On the surface, it’s obvious we do believe in the resurrection of Christ because we make a pretty big deal about it on Easter Sunday. We dress in our spring pastels, die Easter eggs, hide them, and then hunt them down. We eat lots of chocolate. I come up here and bellow out “*Christ is risen!*” We know the drill. It’s pretty hard not to think of Easter as our big moment.

It certainly is for Paul, so much so that every one of his letters talks about the resurrection, often at great length. He *insists* on the resurrection, and those who don’t make him angry. To the faithful in Philippi, Paul says, “I want to know the power of the resurrection” and it’s important to point something out here. Paul doesn’t say, “I want to know *about* the resurrection.” Nor does he say, “I *know* the power of the resurrection!” He says, “I *want* to know the power of the resurrection.” Why is this significant?

You see, for Paul, implication of the resurrection is not static. The resurrection was not simply an event that *happened* but, rather, an *ongoing* transformative reality. This he believes so much that he goes on to say, “I want to share in His *suffering* by becoming *like him* in his *death!*” Now that’s intense, wouldn’t you say? For Paul, belief in the resurrection involved the dying of self for the sake of others, and without fear! Thus, in another letter to the Corinthians, he says, “Death is at work in us, but life in you!” You see, resurrection is not an event. It’s personal. It involves people. It involves a Person.

My hope this morning, first for myself, and then for you, is that we might be compelled by Paul, that we too would *want* to know the power of the resurrection in this way.

Paul indeed wanted this for the Corinthian congregation. The situation there, however, offers a sobering reminder that even the beliefs most central to the Church can get challenged, diluted, or marginalized altogether. It's no wonder, then, that when Paul hears word that congregants are questioning the resurrection of the dead, it gets his blood going.

Now note that the Corinthians aren't questioning the resurrection of Jesus per se, but rather, whether the dead bodies of believers (or anyone for that matter) are raised. Are you following me? It's a legitimate distinction and two distinct questions, but Paul will go to great lengths to say that you cannot have one without the other. To more fully appreciate why this is so, however, it behooves us to take a moment to understand what "resurrection" meant BEFORE Jesus rose on Easter Sunday.

What is "resurrection?"

The Greek word for resurrection is anastasis, which is the conjunction of the words "again" and "stand." So resurrection roughly means to "stand again." It is important to know that this term means something very specific to the Judeo-Christian community, and it involves the raising of dead bodies back to normal life. Now, it's more than this, but at the basic level, this is what it meant for someone in that cultural context to be resurrected. In other words, zombies don't count.

There were other mythologies that involved dying and rising, but they were just that. Myths. Myths, for example, of Egyptian or Greek gods that died and returned in the form of other natural entities, or the Phoenix bird, that died and rose again from the ashes, over and over again.

More common are beliefs about various forms of after-life which, again, is not the same as resurrection. As brother Joel preached a few weeks ago, Plato elevated the soul above the body so high as to assume its immortality, over against our crude, temporal, earthen vessels destined for the dust-bin of nothingness.

The close cousin to the immortality of the soul in, say Hinduism, is the notion of reincarnation, something that I became convinced of as a high-schooler. Inside of me was this "me" that made choices, had crushes, got heartbroken, etc. And that it would somehow live on after my body withered away. Where would it go? Someone else's body, of course. Or maybe an animal! Egyptians mummified their dead, not because they expected the body to rise, but rather to remain a home for the soul. As you can see, among these various belief systems, there was no need for the resurrection of bodies. Souls either left bodies, stayed in bodies, or re-inhabited newly-generated ones.

The Day of Resurrection

Not so for one particular group of people. There is one group for whom bodily resurrection very much matters, and this was, and is, Israel, especially by the 2nd century BC, just prior to the time of Christ. As Protestants, we don't pay much attention to the Apocrypha, written

between the two Testaments, but 2 Maccabees chapter 7 offers some helpful insight this morning. Maccabees was written from the context of the Maccabean Revolt, a Jewish rebellion precipitated by a crackdown led by the Greek imperial King Antiochus the 4th, tired of the Jews shunning his Hellenistic influence within his empire.

To appreciate the cruelty of Antiochus is to watch the movie, or read the book, *Silence*, a story I consider to be among the most important for the Church today. If you plan to watch the movie, brace yourself. If you're middle school or younger, I'd say wait a few years. But I was struck by the horrifying martyrdom experienced by this family of eight, a mother and her seven sons, as described in 2 Maccabees. They faced the choice of eating pork, thereby denouncing their faith, or being dismembered, scalped, and lowered into cauldrons of boiling liquids. One by one, refusing to cave to the empire, they suffered their grisly demise, but not without lashing out at their tormenters: "You accursed fiend, you are depriving us of this present life, but the King of the universe will raise us up to live again forever! As for you, there will be *no* resurrection to life!" "We're coming back, but as for you, you're dust!" they were basically saying.

Now where did the Jews get this idea of resurrection from? Not from the Torah, for the first five books of the Bible make no mention of a resurrection. This, by the way, is why the Sadducees of Jesus' day didn't believe in the resurrection, because they fixated solely on the Torah. If it wasn't in the Torah, then it didn't matter. But for historic Israel, in exile and under foreign domination, generation after generation came to hold onto promises of a *Day of Resurrection* when a triumphal Messiah King would come, and raise everyone bodily from the ashes, to live in peace in the Kingdom come. The psalmists hint at it, as in Psalm 103: "We are dust...but, the everlasting love of the Lord is upon us." The prophet Ezekiel envisioned it, a day when the Lord would breathe life into the dry bones of Israel, making old skeletons rattle back together, bound with new tendons, skin and flesh. And the prophet Daniel spoke plainly of it, prophesying a time when those who are asleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and contempt.

The New Age

But here's what I want us to see. For the Jews, the *Day of Resurrection* was not just about the resuscitation of their dead bodies, right, it was about the coming of a new age, where justice and peace will prevail forever. prevailed forever. Resurrection was not simply a mass miracle that the prophets promised. No, the resurrection meant the breaking in, the awakening, of the *eschaton*, Israel's long awaited, flesh and blood restoration of God's Kingdom! The righteous would be vindicated, evil would be brought down, a benevolent King would assume the throne, and everlasting shalom would be the new normal!

It is this very resurrection that Mary refers to at the tomb of Lazarus, when she tells Jesus, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus doesn't argue with her. In fact, throughout His ministry, Jesus speaks about resurrection in ways entirely consistent with the Jewish, Pharisaical understanding. Of a *Day of Resurrection*, Jesus has no

issue. But he also says something to Mary in this moment that had to be perplexing, to say the least. He tells her, “*I am the resurrection. All who believe in me shall not die.*” *I am the resurrection.* In a word, Jesus is saying, *I am the eschaton.* You see, the eschaton is not only a time or new age, the eschaton is a *person!* This is odd. This is different. When Jesus asks Mary if she believes this, you may remember that she replies, “I believe you are the Messiah,” but the part about the being the resurrection seems lost on her. You see, Mary was emblematic of those who had come to know and follow Jesus. They knew Jesus was sent by God, but they did not anticipate that He would end up nailed to a cross, dead and buried, much less that he would rise again and, in so doing, be the beginning of their long-awaited age to come.

Paul’s Teaching on the Resurrection

You see, something really, really big happened on Easter Sunday, and the apostle Paul was not going to stand for any teaching in the Corinthian congregation that would compromise Easter’s full meaning. Therefore, Paul must confront the Corinthian’s Plato-influenced rejection of a resurrection of the dead. He cuts to the chase. If the dead aren’t raised, then Christ wasn’t raised. Simply put, you cannot have one without the other. There is too much at stake here so Paul raises his voice: “If Christ is not raised, our proclamation is futile, our faith is in vain, we remain dead in our sins, and we, of all people, are most to be pitied!”

Knowing that simply saying *this* was not sufficient, Paul instructs further. “The fact is,” he says, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. Since death came through a human being, i.e. Adam, resurrection of the dead will also come through a human being, i.e. Christ, for as all die in Adam, remember the fall, so all will be made alive in Christ. You see, because of the original sin of Adam, we are destined to be dust. This is what Ash Wednesday is all about, yes? On Ash Wednesday, when Sharon and Doug smear ashes on our forehead, we are reminded of our mortality, our creatureliness, our human frailty, that from dust we came, and to dust we shall return. But we do so to be reminded that we must therefore repent and believe in Christ for in Him, as He joins Himself to us, we receive the hope of immortality. This is what means when he says, “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.” It’s a breathtaking thought, is it not?

But Paul has more to say. He wants to offer them the big picture. The Jews awaited the eschaton or the new age, but in Christ, the eschaton was now here! The defining moment came at the cross when, as Doug preached last Sunday, Christ identified with us fully and completely by descending to the absolute lowest place, death, and then rose from death that we too might rise on the *Day of Resurrection.*

Next, Christ will destroy every ruler and every authority and power until he has put all his enemies under his feet. Lastly, Christ defeats death itself, once and for all, making way for the life everlasting. There’s so much to say about what life in the everlasting will be like, and we’ll get this later in the creed regarding *the resurrection of the body*, but let me simply say that contrary to popular opinion, heaven is not our ultimate destiny, life in the new earth

will be. We will not be ethereal spirits floating around in clouds with harps. We shall be living in real physical spaces with physical bodies with physical continuity with the ones you have now. You see, bodies matter, yes? We've been hearing this in every sermon for the past five weeks. God *created* bodies, Christ was *birthed* from a body, He had his *own* body, and He made the ultimate, life-giving sacrifice *in* a body, *for* our bodies. And our bodies came with souls that, as Doug preached last week, were never meant to be disembodied. The oneness of soul and body is God's design - what it means to be...human.

And in the new earth, we'll still be interacting with each other, brothers and sisters from past, present, and future. Except without the insecurity, the competition, the awkwardness, the silent judgment, the fake smiles. Instead, there will be no tears, no sadness, sheer freedom and safety with one another, blissful intimacy regardless of whether you're an introvert or extrovert. Imagine life in community without the sin. Without racism, bigotry, domestic violence, dirty politics, or economic injustice. Mindblowing, yes. But if you believe in the resurrection, this our trajectory. In Christ, we're on the road toward God's good future.

Now, while the destination is going to be incredible, the road will not be easy. This is because God pulled a surprise and, through Jesus Christ, broke into the old age with the new. The eschaton is here, but the dying order still exists. This is what it means to live between the ages, to be a part of the here-and-not-yet Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

This past week, brother Lance and I attended a lecture (yep, something he and do together occasionally for fun) on the private prison industry. We learned of the accelerated rise of private prisons, but also that they've actually been around for a long, long time. We heard about how profoundly under-trained, under-paid, under-vetted, and under-staffed these prisons were, and how much stress and violence existed within their walls, and out into their families. Most egregiously, we learned about how the privatization of prisons promise savings for governments, yet also incentivize incarceration numbers. The more prisoners, the more profit. And so money being spent on more prisons is less money spent on the rehabilitation needed to keep people out of prison. The whole thing painted a picture of death and darkness.

But we also experienced some death and darkness in the room. During the Q&A, a young woman of color went to the mike and lashed out at the largely white panel and audience. She painted them with a broad brush, accusing them of racist insensitivity to economic realities of nonwhites, and a false sense of immunity to life in prison. Someone in the audience defended the panel, basically telling them to ignore the girl. This caused the girl to react and posture toward the guy, and then many others in the room scowled and fired words back at her, and Lance I thought we were going to have a riot of our own, right there in the Commonwealth Club!

Experiences such as these offer pictures of human community left to its own devices. Insurmountable problems, lots of good intentions, very few answers, profound distrust and division, and an inability to get out of our own way. If we're just dust, there is no meaningful hope. It is tempting to either try harder, or simply throw up our hands and disengage. But the resurrection changes all that. We can imagine another way because another way has already begun. Whether in the broken relationships in our families, our workplaces, and our world, we can live in the reality that the resurrection changes everything. We now bear the image of the man of heaven. Christ has risen, and we are being raised with Him. Thanks be to God, in the risen Christ, we are more than dust.